

collected poems

risa bear

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by the same author

100 poems

homecomings

iron buddha

Starvation Ridge

Viewing Jasper Mountain

she sells books

from nine to six. They are
good books, well bound, well written, colorful
to the eye, and children love them, but

the town is poor. She sits waiting for hours
for one grandmother to come in and buy one book
for a favored grandchild. The owner of the store

is her friend; she cannot leave her just now, but the store,
she knows, is not her place in life. All
she has ever wanted is to farm: at evening,

when the dinner things are cleared, and the hot sun
drops behind the cottonwood, she farms.
Food for the ducks, and soapy water for broccoli;

old lettuce gone to seed comes out; the hay
is rearranged, and fall peas go in. She stops
only to hear the geese pass overhead,

then bends among her plants until the stars,
first one and then another, leap and are caught
in the hair of approaching night, so like her hair.

She comes in, soiled to the elbows, leans against
the table, extending an open palm. "Look,"
she says, her eyes afire. "Marigold seeds!"

w e w e n t t o s e e t h e p l a c e

in Walterville.

Before we had even seen the house, the neighbor,
a man of some seventy years, bent with woods work,

stopped to chat. "The house isn't much, but the soil
is good. Oh, it has some Scotch broom, I know,
on the pasture, but you can get ahead of that

if you keep after it. I helped the last folks with
their fence, but they wanted the gate right here,
where the tractor couldn't get in. They'd no sense."

We asked why no fence between his place
and "ours." "Oh, I don't need a fence. Don't want
your apples, and you're welcome to mine."

The sort of thing we'd hoped. We walked over
the pasture till we reached the incense cedars,
each one five feet thick, and found a hanging

branch worn smooth by generations of children's
swinging. Good, and the valley here was wide,
with the mountains stretching east and west,

and sunshine access on short winter days.
But the house wouldn't do; bedrooms dark
and tiny, with telltale smell throughout

of dry rot underneath. Desire for land
sets one dreaming. One acre, three acres--
not enough to farm, but who can farm

with these prices? It becomes a privilege

just to set out onions, and a cow
is not mere luxury, but even a kind of madness

to actually hope for. We have cross fenced
our high-taxed valleys so that to walk straight
for five minutes can't be done, and all

the while buying our produce from five hundred
miles away, where the tractors have as many
wheels as your freeway rig. I want to put

my hands into the ground and make it yield
enough to make my children grow, and not
grow poor in the process. We drove home,

and quarreled along the way about land,
the way people do who have gone to see
not only what they could not have afforded,

but ought not to have desired. The ducks
were glad to see us; she watered them, and I
picked tomatoes, and we kissed and made up,

and lay awake in our small suburban house
beneath the wheeling moon and stars. Why is it,
I wondered then and wonder now, that no one

ever seems to know when they have enough?
When sleep came, there was a vivid dream.
I met again the old man with no fence,

and saw him pointing to the earth. "This
was river bottom in here not too long ago,"
I heard him say. "When we drilled down forty

feet, we hit a driftwood tree, even though
the river now is half a mile away." He opened
up the earth somehow, and showed me the tree,

still caught amid the smooth and rounded stones
deep beneath the topsoil, which now I saw
was dark and rich, as he had said it was.

I reached to touch the soil, and awoke.
The northbound train was rumbling by the house,
carrying produce from industrial farms,

and I was drenched in sweat, and found the moon
had drifted far across the window to the west.

b r i g h t l y c o l o r e d p a c k e t s

She spreads the brightly colored packets
round the table, and speaks of hope.
I lift a flat paper envelope, with its picture

of a perfect beet, and shake it like a rattle,
"Hey-ya!" She sits across, nodding and smiling,
and hefts a half pound of peas, offering its promise,

like incense, to the gods of our little life.
We've drawn out and made domains of the gardens.
The east one, very small, is on the highest ground,

and drains superbly. It is all hers. She loves
to dig in early spring and late in the fall,
coaxing brassicas, beets, chard, sugar snap peas

to grow in long succession through the year.
The south garden, sheltered from hot winds,
but prone to wetness, is mine. I've raised my beds

high as I can pile them, tossed away stones,
and spread out golden chunks of bales of straw,
redolent of the ducks who've nested on them.

Here tomatoes and sunflowers, limas and vine crops
broil in the sun by day and rest by night.
The north garden, on the only flat, gets sun,

but stays colder longer. It is the largest,
so we share it, and here we fight. I look for
long rows of corn and beans, and always more

tomatoes. She tries new things I can't pronounce,
and seeks the permanence of berries: raspberry
is her favorite thing under the sun, I dunno.

We fight over water, when to use, how much.
We fight over planting depth, shade, what
to harvest when, and how long to blanch beans.

We fight all the way to the bedroom; its north window
opens onto the windswept beds. In plain view
the rustling rainbow windsock

presides there over the rustling corn, and our
fighting turns to sudden loving. We hold
each other's life, like seed, in careworn hands,

and sleep, like seed, until the sun's return.

it was not enough

to see, in colorful magazines and costly books, the country homes and garden walks that men and women build

who have only ready money and a few ideas.
I too wished to sit sometimes drinking
tea by firelight, admiring a work of beams

and plaster, hanging fruit and herbs, good books
liberally strewn, and a sleeping cat (or two).
To which end we labored without cash, days

and even nights with saw and chisel, scraper,
hammer, knife, and plane, using such wood,
such paint, and even such nails as came to hand.

Our friends and friends of our friends remembered us
when their surplus had to go, and I went forth
with battered truck and pry bar, gathering decks

and fences long past keeping for those without
the patience to rebuild. We have learned
to watch for stones of certain weight and shape;

to lay a course of ninety-year-old brick,
to scrap a window sash to get the glass
for cutting, and to fill the oddly angled wall

with joint compound. When supplies ran short,
we turned to the acre of ground, and forked and spaded,
laying out long beds, piling them with straw,

covering the paths with leaves of oak, maple

and ash. Seeds bought last year at sale,
ten cents a pack, were sown with trembling hand.

They all did well: the new shelves are fat
with harvest. This all has come late to me. Now
we do sit in chimney-corner like the English cottage-

keepers, tea in hand and cat in lap,
ready to peruse an act of Winter's Tale
or book of Faerie Queene, only to find

our eyes no longer focus on ten-point type
for an act or a book at a time. I call the youngest
child; she reads to me from Sendak, or

our mutual favorite, Potter, haltingly,
but with a will, improving as she goes.
As she sounds out words, I watch a knot

of fir collapse into the coals, and fall
to long, light sleep, with not unpleasant dreams.

took a piece of bread

and wandered: down
to pools, to streams; examined the undersides
of clouds, swimming on their slow grey backs

in still water. These and the spring-bare trees,
and the winter teat of thawed leaf mould,
and the new birds on old nests, breast-brave,

egg-rich and cocksure, and the first fawn
mothered in close twilit last-year's bracken
say the old songs in the blood (again), the stories

and the root-songs sung to the wordless waters
passing these, through and among, to the sea:
we all do this, take breath and be not afraid.

where the wide waters

roll, the fishermen
roll their nets and go to the sun, to the broad
boats, where light, dancing, leafs boats

bright in gold, and gulls cross, crying,
the scene, and cross again, complaining, where
the fish, deep-dwelling, wait. And waves

rise foaming, and the long swells' song
breaks like bread, or prayer, on the blood's tide;
all here oar-raised, green-psalmed, time-stopped

and the soul-strewn hulls gull-followed and gold-leaped,
arriving, see God's sung gifts named and given
into hands, working the nets, pull! And make

all things new, as the gulls ask alms, and the fish,
lashing, gape their salt breath out, and lie
still, communing. The wine-dark seas pass under,

and the heavy boats swing round, and the men roll
their nets and go, numb-handed, backs bent, harbor bound,
gift-laden, home: where light, fast fading, locks

land in gold, and gulls cross, crying, the scene,
and cross again, crying.

e m i l y,

you almost kiss
the bed with your small lips,
sipping night in these

surprising infant gasps
that hold a little life in you
for seconds at a time.

You sleep well, unless
the hour is cool, and then
you hunt for arms, and nose

to cold nose, tell silently
all you know into our beating hearts
until dawn comes.

I listen in fear,
for I suspect
that when I learn

what you are saying here between
your parents in the dark,
I will weep and mourn

our having brought you here
without your wings.

w e a r e t h a t k i n d

of town-bred country folk
that say, when asked, oh yes, we do keep stock,
then easily turn the subject to one side.

Some friend persists; she wants to know the worst.
"If you," I tell her, "want to do this, under-

stand: sometimes you'll have to take the place
of God." Our ducks, good Khaki Campbells, come
by mail in lots of twenty, every second

year. When small, they're all engaging, all
underfoot, following our steps with small
heartwarming cries. But half are drakes. In high

summer I don my serious face, and tie
with care my long blue apron on. I go
to the barn, butcher's block in hand, and like

the surgeon spread my choicest tools nearby.
The axe is first, and as its blade is rising,
I feel the panic rising in the eyes

hidden beneath my unrelenting hand.

fourth of july

The rest were absorbed by crowds round the huge cherry trees, or on the impromptu volleyball court, or touring the huge gardens, or tasting,

in hot sun, microbrews found floating in icy washtubs. The boy, who never mixed well, wandered off to sit in shade alone, a brown study.

To him I gravitated, not crowd-pleased myself, and said: In the car's trunk there are two rods, and the creek is still high; perhaps along the bank

we can find bait. He had never, in his ten years, caught fish, as he often reminded me, but I had never found the time. I found the time.

We slunk away, and stalked along the country road deep in shade of hemlocks, cedars, and bigleaf, looking for a way steep-down, with vine maples

and giant ferns to cling to. Below, the sun burned on golden unmown hay, lodged by the frequent passage of quite untroubled blacktailed bucks with harems.

We found the place, and bushwhacked through to where the icy water rippled over bedrock beneath the old-growth alders. All there

was just so, with a good pool every fifty feet, black with promise. I looked for caddis larvae, turning over stones, and finding nothing,

but the boy quick of eye and hand leaped up with a tiny crawdad clutched. I gently took

and threaded the sacrificial creature on the shank

of the gleaming, tiny hook. I glossed over the pain,
as so many have done before me,
of this small life, quickly casting hook,

life, and split shot expertly into riffle
just above a pool half-lost in willow branches.
I handed him the rod. He sulked: It won't work,

I'll never catch a fish, and this creek's
too small. I said, do not misjudge it. The trout
winter here, and are not driven by the sun

to the river's deeper pools till later on.
There will be several in that hole, and one
of them will be big. He watched the willows,

the dappled banks, the far pasture, passing birds,
and me; I watched the line. It zigged. Pull!
I shouted, and the boy hauled back, more

in startlement than skill; I itched to snatch
the rod from him. Reel in, reel in, pull back,
give him slack, now reel! I was beside myself,

and so was the lad. The fish fought well, then
gave up at our feet, reeled on to land. We
slacked line, and I knelt and slipped my hand

along the back, so as not to get caught on hackles,
and disengaged the hook. I whispered: this
is a rainbow trout; see the colors as I turn her

in the sun. The boy stroked the big trout gently,
and solemnly announced: I have caught a fish.
We waded through the riffle to let her go;

but she was tired all through, and rolled
over, showing white. I gave the boy the way
to turn trout right, facing upstream, until

they catch their wet breath and swim away unaided.
He helped the fish, and stood up rich in life; then,
reluctant to break the moment and go back,

we stood together, silent as two trees.

g e o r g e f o x

sits in hollow trees in the rain,
and seeks this same God whom all the people
call upon, half in jest, from pillowed pews.

The King! The King! cry they, asleep, while he
sees chains still on their legs, and his,
and questions this, and them, asking of priests

and of great men of learning, hearing but vacancy
in their sonorous answers. Then, in a high place
(it is often in these high places that it happens,

take heed) he heeds a voice no chain will stand,
and his heart leaps. All creation has now
for him a new smell, such as it had not before,

and the God-swarmed man's heart leaps over the world,
and over its bad master. Good George, broad head
bible-steeped, sees through the steeple to the soul's

church, and calls in the voice of Isaiah: come,
buy wine and bread without money and without price!
And many come to hear the mad man speak;

life is hard, and God's fools must be their fun.
But this one will strike sparks, his Christ-fire spreads!
Hell helpless for once looks on, as love, the power

of God, rises from the dead; even England
draws saints' breath, and some for a time are such
as God in Eden walked with.

the painted angel

with his heavy wings
paced along the footworn ancient flags
of the deep cathedral nave before the quiet

congregation, awaiting three Marys,
ready to proclaim the great and terrible emptiness
of God's tomb: *Non est hic; surrexit,*

sicut praedixerat! So that a friar
preaching to a dubious crowd, at length
advised them: "If you believe not me, go

to Coventry, where you may see it acted
every year." Faith enacted may
be faith, or it may not be faith, and yet

thousands were thrilled to hear the angel cry,
and homeward bent their weary peasant backs,
some with missing limbs or eyes, and some

all poxed, yet talking as they went, of God,
and of brightness all around, one night,
that vexed those frightened shepherds long ago.

eighty-six, he stands

in his garden and tells
of the journey from Ohio that never ended,
not even with the case of sun-ripe peaches.

"The Lord sure has blessed me. Oh, yes.
See how the apricots grow, and the pears,
and the oranges? And these now, the farmers

hate them, but I don't, I water them;
the Spaniards, when they landed, looked for a sign
and the loaves and the fish of our Lord

were seen in the flowers of the vine."
He walks in the shade of the live oaks,
talks of Kentucky, of boyhood and manhood,

Of the girl that he married, who fell
years later, and broke something inside,
and the child they had found, and the land,

and the tall pines he tended, that stand
where the wind-driven lake once rippled
and broke on the crystalline sand.

m a r c h i n g o n t h e p o t o m a c, 1 9 7 1

Music videos, I admit, do hurt my eyes. They seem
like moments that have been seized by those who believe

they are young, and also believe that history is only words
and also believe that with images, words can be left behind

forever, words and the history that is made with words, and death,
which is made up of history, and pain that rehearses for death, and
the memories

of shame the pain is built on – but the shame and pain
are images, yes? and history, yes? your history, your story

you tell yourself in pictures, is your music video
sung to self-loathing; and the one way, short of becoming

a filmmaker, of spitting it out, is to trade in words, the
the betrayer words that lie as soon as the ink is dry.

While I, so suddenly crone, thinking on mortality,
walking off small ounces along the winter river,

remember seizing a moment, standing with three hundred young
such others in our vision of moral progress

around the entrance to the dark abysmal cave:
National Selective Service Headquarters. We begged them

to come out, the denizens of the cave, and took up collections for
their families if only they would come out. Some did,

and even took the money, perhaps to return to work
next day with a laugh. Provocateurs circulated

among us, trying to hand out bad acid, but we stood firm,
singing our power songs learned from those who had come

here before us: Oh Freedom; We Shall Overcome;
so then the men in blue, with their sunglasses and their long

sticks, moved in and carried us away, one by
one, to the buses. D.C. Central Precinct Station,

in case you're curious, is, or was, thirty years
ago, like this: a corridor long and grey, with few

lights, and rows of animal cages, dark, with broken
bulbs recessed in peeled ceilings. Each

cage has two iron shelves hung from the wall
on chains, and no mattresses on the shelves; on the rear wall

a strange porcelain thing, both sink (not working) and toilet
(not working either); both filled with horrors, and running

onto the floor. Distance from front to back: eight feet.
From side to side, six feet. Someone is screaming contin-

ually; another starts the ancient chant, AUM.
It catches on, a hundred and fifty short-time nuns

in retreat, and the screamer settles down to a comforted
whimper. All day, half the night. At two in the morning,

arraignments. Fifty people standing in an empty room,
hungry. A judge passes the door, returns, converses

through the slot. You weren't read your rights? You don't
know the charges? No phone calls? Nothing? He goes away,

returns, passes fifteen candies through the mail
slot. All I can do right now, he says, I'll see what I

can do about this. We never see him again. We
are processed in groups of four. An old black woman comes.

She is our lawyer. Have you seen the charges? No?
Hey, you, go and get the charges so they can plead;

is this a court or a pool hall? They read us the charges.
False, from beginning to end, and they know it! You can hear it

in their shamed voices. They're young, like us, and got these jobs
for the sake of Kennedy, their dead god; they aren't used to

shitting on the people. I hear that I was seen by witnesses
(in blue, with their sunglasses and their long sticks) committing

unspeakable violence and destroying Property. Hearing
the shame in their trembling voices, I am brought to tears

of a new kind, deep grief for my country, which I had somehow
believed in, a little, until that moment, and for my now

forever lost innocence in these things. The judge leans forward.
Young lady, if you will plead guilty, I can let you go

right now with a ten dollar fine. If you plead not guilty, you
will be held in jail and your trial will not come up for two

months yet. I want you to know that the Central Precinct is clean
and uncrowded compared to the City Jail. How

do you plead? Tears are drying; I tremble with sorrow and anger.
Someone, a stranger, steps up and sets a flower in the lapel

of my coat. Not guilty. All four of us say, not guilty as charged;
our old lawyer's eyes are wet with pride. The judge

hesitates; says that for twenty-five dollars each, we

can go bail. I'm eight hundred miles from home, with ten cents to
my name. Someone, another stranger, hands over twenty-
five dollars for me; I leave the courtroom dazed and hungry.

I have nowhere to go. It is three o'clock in the morning.
The demonstrations have been going on all week, and I

haven't eaten in maybe three days, or four. I'm not
sure I can make it to the Friends Meeting House where I know

I can sleep. There is a voice from above: Hey, you! I look up. It is a
middle-aged woman in curlers and a robe, in a third-floor window

of, for God's sake, the D.C. Hilton Hotel. Are you
one of the people that just got out of that kangaroo court?

I heard about it on the radio! Wait right there, says she,
and disappears. A moment later, she's in the window

again, and a can of Coca-cola, two orders of fries,
and a half-eaten burger fall from the sky. She looks over

Her shoulder, afraid of someone. Gotta run! So
it goes; wars and rumors of wars are for the rich;

it is left to the trapped, the owned and the poor to feed one another.

The following is an *epistola metrica* composed in English in imitation of and playfully attributed to Francesco Petrarca. The appended sonnet is however genuine and translated from the Italian.)

“Petrarch here deliberately gives the impression that he is writing from Vacluse soon after his brother Gherardo, the presumed addressee of the epistle, has joined the Carthusian order in 1343, perhaps in the winter of 1343-44. But at this time Petrarch was in Naples and then Parma. Parma is vividly mentioned in the poem, but other internal evidence strongly suggests that the letter is of later date, after 1348 at least. If the letter was written at Vacluse, it would probably date from the period of his residence from 1351-53, after he had begun but not finished collecting his *familiarum rerum libri*. It is possible that Petrarch composed this letter, among others, with the intention of inserting it at a specific point in the chronology of collected letters and that it was not intended for Gherardo's eyes at all. The letter, however, is stylistically inferior to much of Petrarch's work, and he must have realized this, for it was never included in his finished work, and has only recently come to light, quite by accident. The original is in Latin, with a sonnet appended in Italian.”

In the closed vale,

my sweet brother, the swallows
are doing their silent work without complaint.
They are like you; wherever they are the people

are made happier, and everything becomes
much cleaner, as after April rains. It was
April, you know, when you chose to leave me here,

and all your friends, and the long nights of talking
of glorious ancients, and of the fathers of sad
spurned faith, and poor neglected Rome.

Even so was it April when my heart,
as you know, left me for another, never to return
while I have life, so that every laurel

and every breeze might mock my emptiness,
and my soul hung like a green leaf before
the breath of crowds; my reputation was their toy

and their laughter blew me about upon the branch
till I, brown and sere, fell upon the stream
and drifted here, deep in the shadows of my own

closed vale, my sweet brother, that is so like
me, for its hidden spring weeps in winter
and in summer, without end. But you

have been a comfort to me; whether here,
nesting like a swallow in the cliff above
the east bank of the green and tumbling stream;

or far below, in the dusty-throated Babylon

on the plain: a counter to the madness
and corruption of that place, and a complement

of cheerful sufficiency in the other, always
helpful in my crazed efforts to placate
the nymphs of the vale, while honoring the muses

that always make them jealous, so that every
meadow, every garden we built there
was swept away within the year; their fury

undiminished till complete; their victory
leaving no sign of all that I -- that we
had striven to plant or build to beautify

our memories of that place. And just as our gardens
were swept away by the jealous nymphs, I feel
you too have been stolen -- by a jealous God. Please,

my sweet brother, bear with me, for I feel
swollen with sorrows, but I mean no blasphemy!
Does not the Father of Heaven himself say,

"I am a jealous God"? and he takes away
the best, always, because the best is right
for him to take. And I know that it is God

that has taken you, and not some gang of monks
whose heaven is an inn, and whose God
is carried within the circle of their belts!

Rather, I know it is God because only the Father
inspires the life of the silent men, whom you
have been inspired to join with, not a rabble

of cenobitic share-alls, grubbing each
at the other's blanket under a common roof,
breathing garlic in one another's ears

the whole night long, and begging for new wine
or chasing women all the day, making
the name of Christ a joke to the common people,

so that when these beggars go out for alms,
a man may say to them, "What! You here again?"
and call some poor fellow from the ditch

and give the alms to him instead, saying
"Here! In Mohammed's name, for he truly
is stronger than the Christ these fellows talk of!"

But your order, an eremitic city set
on a hill, is cleanly, faithful, quiet, and strong
in the kindly works of our Lord. They and you

are so alike, how could it have been otherwise?
Thus do I say, a jealous God took you,
for he could not bear this filthy world should hold

such a one another day. All
my friends are like you in this; the Lord loves
them all too well; he takes them, one by one;

Remember Parma? It was there, you know,
by the bench I told you I'd had built,
that I, one day, was weeding among the bulbs,

near enough to the little brook to hear
its crystal song above the deeper roar
of the famous city so close by, and a darkness

came and stood upon that bridge, and I
looked up and into that darkness, as I have done
so often at the mouth of the fountain here

(for I am not afraid of caves and darkness,

and love to walk at night, even when
there is no moon), and saw therein our friend,

Giacomo Colonna, striding across
where that branch of the plane tree dips so closely
to the pool, between the bench and the wall.

I greeted him, surprised, and most concerned,
for he was hurrying along, and had no company,
and seemed as if he would not -- could not -- tarry.

He smiled, yet would not be embraced, and said
(I will never forget his words then!),
"Don't you recall the awful storms along

the baleful crest of the high Pyrenees?
You hated them; so did I, and now
I am leaving those places forever: I am for Rome."

I wanted to go with him, but he was so stern
it made me afraid to speak; it was clear
that he would not have me go, so I looked

closely on him, to fix his beloved features
forever in my mind, and it was then
that I saw how pale he was, and knew that he

was dead. I have said elsewhere that this
was in a dream, but already I am not so sure.
Colonna died that very day, you know;

So I feel I really saw him. But you I never
see now, asleep or awake, but only remember.
Even as I write, I remember,

and it seems as though I might shape you
with my words. I see you as you were
when we braved the craggy slopes so high

above this shady valley, when we were young.
You took the straight path as it lay before you,
up and over all obstacles,

no matter how fearsome, and never stopped till you
had reached the appointed goal. You were then
just as you are; that is why God loves you

best! While I, wandering this way and that,
sought to take a path that looked the easiest,
but found to my chagrin it turned downhill.

I was lucky to reach the top at all,
but I did! I did! You cannot deny it, brother.
And it was I who brought our precious saint,

Augustinus, with us all that way.
The clouds were lower down, with the late sun
bright on their broad fleecy backs, and the Alps

shone so far to the south, between us and
our father-country Italia, and the sea.
At our feet, so near it seemed a dream,

the Rhone, gleaming, in its bed of stones.
All this was first yours, but also mine,
and I brought forth Augustinus from my breast

and gave his benediction to that day:
that men wander through the world gazing
upon the high mountain tops, the great

ocean waves and deeply springing rivers,
and the slow-turning canopy of bright stars,
yet never think to look upon their souls.

This you have done; but this, I fear, I fear

to do, or rather wish to do but always turn
just as I reach the heavenly door, to seek

some easier-seeming path, some flowered way,
and always find, as on that peak, my way
leading down, toward some darkened place.

God be my witness, I often try to turn
there on my pleasant-seeming path, back
to the place where last I saw the door, but it

by then is gone, and nothing there I find
but a smooth expanse of bramble-covered wall.
And now you write to me and say the things

I have so often told myself, troubled,
as you must believe, beyond the common run
of men in sin! Brother, I have even

made a small book wherein I keep
my lapses and successes; already once
I kept myself safe for two years

and seven months; now, it is true, the priest
to whom I go for confession is kept busy,
but I trust the Lord will give me strength.

In living alone, as you know by now, there is
much to be gained. I have here the two
faithful servants and the dog, and visitors

come, but not too often, and the people
of the valley seem to regard me as their judge,
but I do have, as you have seen for yourself,

a space to myself within the walls of my
small house, south windowed, and endowed with one
extravagant-seeming thing: a good *scriptorium*.

Nearby are the books, my closest friends: they
(Virgil, Cicero, Livy, and the rest,
and Augustinus, my advisor and true

confessor) open continually their great treasures
to me, and through me, to all the world beside.
Do you not rise and pray in the midst of night

that all the saints may bless the wide world?
And the scripture says, "the heartfelt prayer
of a righteous man effecteth much." So too

you pour out the treasures of heaven on
the earth, as I unearth and bring to light
the gold and silver of the past! Brother,

my work is not so unlike yours...except,
of course, that I am able to put my name
on all my little productions! I do admit,

to you, now, dear heart, that I desire
greatly to see my name remembered -- God
forgive this! I see two thirsts in me: the one

to live forever in a name above
the common herd; the other, to nurse along
the hurt that blind boy gave me, years ago

when I was least prepared to defend myself.
Yes, I am still thirsting! Only those
who have never seen her cannot understand!

The light foliage of her hair, the dark
contrasting brows...the all-destroying twin
suns burning in her face, that should

have killed me long since, but Fortune

preserved me, for they have been oft averted;
while my own eyes looked everywhere that she,

I knew, was not, and found her in stones and winds
and even among the roots of trees along
the storm-scoured banks of the river Sorgue.

I have sat upon the grass at midnight
and rained tears on my own breast, because
the stars, so like her in their shining,

wheeled by beyond my reach, as thoughtless
of my suffering as she! And it seems
to me now these two thirsts are one

in some way: that as the light-limbed goddess
vanished, and in her place stood rooted forever
the dreamless, unapproachable laurel tree,

Apollo might have lifted a storm-stolen
branch with which to weave himself a crown
for remembrance; so with me, for to console

myself that tears and smiles, and even my poems,
moved not one, though they move all others,
I might, somewhere along the Appian Way,

pluck some branch of the very tree of hate
and, weaving it round my brows, make it
forever after my crown of love. The Africa

will earn me this, though it is already mine,
but I have begun, my brother, to gather the scattered
leaves that the winds of Love have brought me here

and elsewhere -- if it must be pain, then let the pain
be famed! Famed in France and Italy, and even
as far as the shores walked by Scipio, or

the mountains beyond the sacred land where Christ
walked along the Galilean strand.
Is this dreaming? Perhaps I have dreamed it all;

some will say: "this man invents everything
he says has happened to him"; but, brother,
you know I speak to you truly from the heart,

this heart that is not mine but another's,
for you yourself once loved truly one
who now has gone beyond you and the grave.

What is life? They, the crowd, never
ask, but I have asked, all my days,
and now I tell you what even the ancients most

desired to know, yet never found: this life
of man is a kind of dreaming, whether awake
or sleeping. He rises in a dream, and dresses

with dreaming hands. In the field he dreams of grain,
and at his nets he catches silver dreams.
He looks but cannot see, and hears but nothing

hears, as our blessed Lord tells us; there is
nothing between a man and a man but words,
and our words are all, and only, stuff of dreams.

I make myself in books, brother, because
I want my dreams to go on living yet,
and I know no other way. Is this so evil?

I will tell you more when I come, dear brother,
for I desire much to see you, and
observe the true monastic rule, some days

or even weeks, if the Abbott will allow.

I close by appending a copy of the first
leaf that drifted from my pain, back

to my door here in the wild, so that I might
weave it in the crown that now I wear
here in the closed vale, where it is always

winter in my soul without you, dear brother.

t h e s o n n e t

*Apollo, if yet lives the beautiful desire
that set you aflame by the Thessalian coast,
and if your love for the blonde tresses*

*amid wheeling years, has not found oblivion
through slow ice and sharp, wicked time
enduring while your face yet seems obscured,*

*protect this loved and sacred foliage
by which first you and then I were caught;
and by the virtue of that hope of love*

*that kept you up despite your life of pain,
completely clear the air of all falsehood;
we may then both see a wonder in the same way:*

*seated, our lady, upon the grass
making, with her arms, her own shade.*

o f c o u n t r y f o l k i n a u g u s t

Whenever we worked at the creekside shed
there was always something else to do
such times as we were stumped, or nails ran short,

or the sun reached round the fir and baked us down
from raftering, roofing, or the like. We leaned,
gossip-like, against the fresh framing

of the walls, sipping solar tea,
watching the edge of a cloud's long skirt
chase the neighbors' horses leisurely

across their pasture, down the camas swale
and up the other side, against the black contrast
of maple-shrouded hills. The horses liked

to amble up to our corner, stand and watch.
We couldn't cure them of the shies,
though we might try with handfuls

of our green grass, or a few choice
coaxing words. They'd check us out:
first one black blink from behind

the forehead blaze, and then another,
cocking their long heads round to see
our self-assured, predatory faces, eyes front,

gazing on them, horse-flesh accountants
by their reckoning. Their flanks
would shiver, and their forefeet stamp,

scoring the earth in a language built of weight.

Some movement would always spook them off:
a silvery chisel hefted, or water bottle sloshed,
spattering sun. They'd hammer up the swale;
Lovingly we'd watch them go, coveting
our neighbors' lands and all that lived thereon,
as country folk in August always do.

press run

She'll choose two cans of color, exploring them
for the soft caramel of good set, putting aside
flakes of air-dried dross with her inking knife.

One, a can of orange stuff, she's been given
for imprinting brew-pub six-packs; the knife
scoops up a dollop and ferries it to the disk.

The other is your standard black; the smallest
bubble of this she'll add to the orange, and stir,
in hope of a decent brown. A heave of the flywheel

begins the inking-up: the disk turns a bit
with each revolution of the wheel, and the ink,
smashed paper-thin by rollers, spreads evenly

across its face, painting it, painting the rollers,
as her foot pumps the treadle, and her face
admires, as it always does, the view from here,

of garden dressed in straw, of mountain air
training the rainbow windsock northward,
of Jasper Mountain becoming a hill of gold

in the sunset. Gathering the furniture, reglets,
quoins, quoin key, and the new magnesium cut,
she locks the chase, fastens it to the bed, shoves

the wheel, this time with impression lever on,
and lets the cut kiss the clean tympan paper
with an image. Around this image she sets quads,

tympan bales, and bits of makeready, and prepares

the stacked sheets to be fed from the feed board
into the maw of the Chandler & Price, known

to pressmen for a hundred fifty years as the
Hand Snapper. She reaches for the radio's knob.
Rachmaninoff? Damn. Oh, well, turn

wheel, pump treadle, lean forward, lean back,
click-click, click CLACK, work-and-turn,
deliver the finished sheets to the delivery board,

admire mountain, lean forward, lean back.
Rachmaninoff gives way to Mozart's glorious
forty-first symphony, and Jasper Mountain

gives way to night, and in the black window
a woman in her fifties, leaning forward,
leaning back, critically appraising the music,

the printing, and herself, click-click, click CLACK,
sour bones and a game leg but a job well done
and the Mozart's Mozart. Four hundred sheets

later, and well into Bruch, the wheel stops,
the chase is unclamped, the disk and rollers
washed up, and rags canned. The reflected

window-crone lifts a sheet of work
to the light, examines impression and matter.
Reaching to silence Bruch, she sees the stilling

silhouette of the rainbow windsock:
it waits for dawn and a fair and lofting wind.

l e t t u c e i n w i n t e r

The potting room was a miserable dank
shed, trash-choked, roofed in plastic, blackberries
ingrown amid bedlam. she dragged it all into

the light, sifting for tools or nails, then
consigning the rest to dump runs. With one son,
the quiet one, she roofed the room with scraps,

tucking, there, or here, oddly-sized old windows.
To the south, a sliding door turned on its side
served for greenhouse glass. A friend's offer

of a chimney to salvage solved the question of how
to floor. With her other son, the tall one, she
rented a long-legged ladder for picking bricks

from the air, frightened at every ragged breath.
They piled them by the plant-room door, and the girl,
last child, brimful of jokes and laughter, brought

bricks to her from the pile, which she set face up
in a herringbone pattern. They swept sand and mortar
into the cracks, and danced in the sunbeams then.

Now for a bench, new-painted green for the color
of wishing, and pots of all sizes, flats too,
with a tall can for watering. She hankered for lettuce

in winter, and sowed the flats in October. After
a month, wild geese and their musical throats gone south,
she noted her seedlings spindly and sad, so taking

hammer and two-by sixes, built a quick cold frame

with the other half of the always helpful sliding
door. By the sunny south wall in the duck pen she framed it,

and dibbled the seedlings within. They liked that,
but a darkness comes on in December; after a full
day, full week, one comes home exhausted, to eat,

to sleep, not to water gardens. One thing
only has saved the lettuce: the ducks do not like
coming in for the night. She goes into the dark

to disturb them; they rush about complaining;
the madwoman hops and chuckles. She locks them away
from coyotes, and turns, as in afterthought, to visit

her seedlings. By feel she gives them water, her hands
stretching toward summer in the unseen leaves.

j. s. b a c h

She turned up the weeds without pity, spreading
their roots before the sun. Most of them died,
though a few tenacious grasses rolled over

when she was not looking, and sucked earth
till she found them skulking about, and banished them
to the heap with the egg shells and old tea leaves.

Returning to the scene of the massacre, she placed
a five-tined fork before her, pointed toward
the earth's core. On its step she placed her boot's

sole, and drove its teeth home, tearing living soil.
She did this many times, and in her hearing,
the dark loam whispered in protest. But what

was she to do? One must eat, and the white seeds
in their packet were waiting for the sun.
She carried a blue denim bag at her side,

zippered it open, feeling about in its depths
like the housewife at the station platform
seeking her ticket for the last train --

Seizing her prize, she held it in a soiled palm,
reading the runes of inscription:
"Date of last frost"; "zone three," "days

to maturity." How many days now to her own
maturity? Not to be thought of. Her hand
trembled. Tearing the thin paper rind,

she tipped out contents: a shirtfront
of buttons. Five seeds to a hill she counted,
pinching their graves over them: three hills.

And on to other tasks. The rainmaker
whispered over hilled earth all
the zone's days to maturity, and the date

of first frost held true. Almost forgotten in the rush
of gathering in others: beans and corn, tomatoes--
she sought them last in October, the golden

fruits of that planting. Her other crops
talk to her; the Hubbards never do. (What are they
dreaming at, over there? She brings out the knife.)

Now it is March, she remembers having gathered
the silent, sulking Hubbards. How are they faring?
A look into the pantry reveals them,

dour and uncommunicative, all
huddled like bollards on the high shelf.
She chooses one to halve on the kitchen block.

Scooping out seeds to dry and roast later,
she bakes the halves till soft, slipping off skins
per Rombauer & Becker. "Dice them,

and in a mixing bowl add butter, brown sugar,
salt, ginger, and move the lot to the mixer,
remembering to add milk." With a bowl

of silent Hubbard thus richly dressed,
she goes to the living room, asking blessing
of the gods of the steel fork and the weeds,

the rainmaker, the packet of white seeds,
booted foot and blue denim bag
and the longtime summer sun, eating,

listening to a fugue by J. S. Bach.

s o m e t i m e s

 this is what you'll come to, picking about
in earth, pulling morning glory roots
like long white worms and heaping them

beside you of a morning: you will become
distant and glum, and as your wrists dry up,
caked in clay, you'll look around you, and

not your small red barn, your irises,
your bamboo patch, your oak and ash,
your three brave maples rattling in the breeze,

your small house bracketed in lilacs, breathing smoke,
your woodshed stacked roof-high,
your mint and parsley putting on new life,

your geese, your ducks, your pear trees in bright bloom
will rid you of the thought of what this is
that you are digging, bit by troweled bit.

Assuming the sun will come out, which now
it does, things won't seem quite that bad,
and yet you will walk stooped, with furrowed

brow, into the house for a late cold lunch
without words, for there are no words
to share what it was the cold ground

said to your hands just now.

o r , s o m e t i m e s

you'll come to this, lovingly rooting
in earth, gently setting to one side
fat worms, watching them

sink from sight with shrugs of their nonexistent
shoulders. As your wrists dry up, caked
in clay, you'll look around you, and

your small red barn, your irises,
your bamboo patch, your ash and oak,
your three unfurling maples whispering in the breeze,

your white house bracketed in lilacs, breathing
smoke, your woodshed stacked with fir,
your mint and parsley putting on new life,

your pears and apples, your geese in their bright plumes
will bring to you the thought of what this is
that you are digging, bit by troweled bit.

Assuming that the clouds will come, which now
they do, you will take things as they are,
and so you simply walk, with even-tempered

gaze, toward the house for a late cold lunch:
one without words, for there are no words
to share what it was your hands

said to the green earth even now.

h a l l c r e e k c a n y o n

When they returned from building the kay-dam
(of logs and drift pins, to make again
a place where salmon might yet spawn)

they divvied up: each hauled a pack frame
loaded with tools and sundries, twice down
the canyon to its end, then up the old fire trails

a mile and a half, ducking vine maples
all the way, to the parked trucks. A third trip
for each would end the business,

but night came on, as it generally does;
they might have come back another day, but
as the moon was full, down they went.

One folded and refolded the old tent
and packed it away, while the others sat,
taking down the old shepherd stove,

dumping ashes, talking. She would walk ahead,
she said, and slumped off down the scoured
sandstone ledge of the dry wash, admiring,

even in near exhaustion, the old moon
drifting among the snags. She came upon
the canyon with its pools and riffles,

and, regarding the first fire trail
as too steep, trudged on to the second,
wading a beaver pond. Logs at the head,

old growth, lay jackstraw piled, and she footed

along them easily, as she had done
in dozens of such draws. A big cedar sighed,

turned lovingly in its sleep, and with
an almost inaudible click, closed over her shoe.
There was with her no axe, no lever of any kind.

She stood knee deep in black water, too far
from the landing to be heard, neatly caught.
What if her co-workers took that other trail?

She looked back as she let slip her heavy pack,
seeing no movement but the falling moon,
knowing that one alone in such a place

has, while there, no name at all.

s i l e n c e

At this high bridge begins silence, even
as whitecapped water beneath
runs against rock and fills the hearing

with its white roar; this is not the sound
of human trivialities, of men disrespecting
women, women turning aside

with embarrassed smiles from men,
the sound of pulling of tabs,
ripping of aluminum, assorted

purrs and rumbles of fire along the pavement,
wrapped in steel. She gathers her oldest friends,
space blanket, matchesafe, whistle, map,

cheese, bread, water bottle, and poncho,
and stuffs them in her old firefighter's vest.
This is a new place, but deduction finds

the lightly traveled path, snaking across
a landscape steeped in stillness.
The vine maples have yet no leaves,

and the moss-lined nests in their jointures
contain no eggs. There are times
when tall firs on these ridges

creak and suffer, a forest of bent masts
in a wind-smashed harbor: this is no such time.
She has been used to walking alone in forests;

has walked among peaks dawn-rosy

at sunrise, or hunkered under the wuther
of rain-heavy winds, or under smother of clouds

among tree-trunks. Now, for a sudden,
she stops, puzzling her alienness. What
can be different? There are yellow violets,

trilliums, oxalis. She gathers moss and horse lettuce,
a couple of conks, and pebbles, yet connection
is missing. Her heart leaps cold in her chest,

and her pulse rattles. On an impulse she whirls
round on her track, examines
the trail behind her and a hillside of

silences. The silence is plural, but how
do you read absence? What does she not see?
Bear? Cougar? It is a feeling one has

when the sights of the rifle are trained
on the back of one's neck. Often in life
she has felt this, but only in cities

and the lifelines of cities, those rivers
of asphalt and their pageant of strangers.
She must establish herself here, she feels;

some introduction has been omitted. She searches
her vest and locates an old pipe,
a treasure remaining from another life;

it goes where she goes, though she thinks of it seldom.
There is little tobacco in the bowl, but enough,
and she chooses a bit of mountain,

a leaf of kinnikinnik, to add. Self-consciously
borrowing culture, she aims the pipe
at four points of the compass, the grey sky,

the soundless earth at her feet, then sits
fumbling with the lid of her matchesafe.
Fire lit, she sends smoke quietly aloft.

It rises uncertainly, then finds the drift
of cold air sliding downslope into evening.
Whatever seemed angry seems to her angry still,

but gives way before the smoke of offering,
and makes with her a capful of truce: she will not
be eaten today, it seems, tripped up, or smashed.

She will not name the place, "place where I broke
my leg" or "place where I lost my spirit."
In return, she must finish this hike now

and not soon return. Replacing the horse lettuce,
conks, moss, and stones, she wryly smiles
a little: if this is superstition, so let it be,

she says to herself. We do what we have to do.
The silence, which she'd thought a hieroglyph
of an unknown tongue, nods and agrees.

the wall her father built

The wall her father built to muscle back
the brown flood waters of the creek still stands.
It leans away from the run and hugs the contour

of serpentine embankment, redeeming years of silt
by interlacing a thousand granite slabs
against the tide of spring and spill of storm.

He could not bear the thought of land he'd
paid for picking up to run away downstream,
ending in useless mingling with other men's dirt

deep at the foot of the continental shelf
ten miles beyond the Chattahoochee's mouth.
So he built. Each day, though tired from climbing

poles in Georgia sun for the Georgia Rail Road,
he slowly removed his cotton shirt and sank
to his knees in the creek, feeling for stones

with his bare toes, prying them out of their beds
with a five-foot iron bar. He heaved them up,
wet and substantial, on the opposite bank,

and judged them, then carried them, staggering
under the load, to their exact spot in the rising wall,
setting them down like Hammurabi's laws, never

to be revoked. The whole he stocked and faced
with wet cement his daughter carried to him,
breathless, in a pair of buckets slung

from a home-carved yoke. Wall done,

he capped it with a pointing trowel, and with
his finger wrote the child's name and the year

nineteen fifty-five, which you will find today
if you scrape back moss. The house has had
six owners since, and of these none has given thought

to who prevented their foundation washing out
with freely offered labor long ago: or perhaps
they have. There's something in a wall's

being there that speaks of someone's having lived
and looked upon the land, giving shape to time
and place. Then taking stone in hand:

b e e c h l a k e

Spring, and spring of her life also. She walks
to water to stand behind sedges, thinking of snakes.
And snakes come. First one, lazily, tail

sculling, head high, counterclockwise along
shore, and then another. And then -- another.
All going, she notes, the same way round. Next day,

incurable child, she rigs a black fly rod
with stout green line tied, butt end and tip end:
a snare. Back to the sun-long lake. The snakes

continue their rounds. She casts loop, she waits.
One comes, riding high in clear water, black eye
bright. Caught, the looping, livid thing

bends the rod double almost. On close inspection
she speaks its given name: common water snake.
Proudly she touches the twisting ribbon of flesh,

but it turns to sink four quiet rows of teeth
deep in the base of her thumb. Shamefaced, she
lets the bright creature go; it swims sedately,

maddeningly counter-clockwise: nothing
has happened to change its agenda. Rod forgotten,
she sinks to her knees among sedges to watch

fishing men quietly fishing in beech-shade,
shading her eyes with her still throbbing hand.

william stafford

Here was a man who was known
as an Oregon poet.

He never wasted words, either.
He wrote a poem

Every day, rain or shine, and so
he had some

rain poems and some shine poems
and if people

came to him saying, sir, give us a book
he would turn

and rummage in desk drawers
or grope

along shelves in the kitchen.
Pretty soon

there was their book, bright as
Sunday morning

but sharp, too, like bottle glass.
He'd hand

it to them carefully, carefully.
And it was

their hint. After that they'd have to
look out for themselves,

and that, I guess, was his Oregon
message.

n e w f o u n d l a n d

Whiteness enough off that coast to last a summer,
with chunks sized to drift among swells
like lost boats rising bottoms up to glimmer,

then dropping from a coastal watcher's view
halfway from here to wherever it is sky
comes down to touch water, blue on blue,

or even larger continents of white
shot through with green, shouldering breakers
with unhurried calm, things for night

to break on, or even day. You and I,
not having seen such before, go out
to frame each other with one in a camera's eye

and watch a schooner nosing among bays
scalloped along fringes of the beast.
The little ship goes near, but turns away

over and over to run, a cur who knows how strong
the behemoth it harries, how final its mere touch.
The white rock nothing notes, but wades along,

a mindless thing, and yet it knows command: we
think of the *Titanic*, sleeping in her mud --
having discharged frail cargo on the sea.

separation

Round the circle of her garden she walks, and stops
again, taking in, as one absent from her own
senses yet unwilling to forgo their gifts,

the half-dimmed light of a low, prepubescent
moon, its influence on lingering clouds,
some few stars brave enough to compete with

mercury vapor or halogen or tungsten,
and taking in also the pungent garlic border,
its enclosure of bean vines, celery, snap peas:

celebratory things, even in this half-light,
this dew of forgotten hours. Her feet,
though well shod, warn her of night, by noting

slow seep of dew round toes and heels.
Her hand, brushing wet night-blooming
jasmine, shrinks from chill. These, and trees

she has encouraged -- apple, plum, pear, cherry,
maple, ash -- seem to her reproachful,
watching, as it were, her heart begin to slip

to a life they cannot share. Beyond, in a stillness
of curtained rooms, her children,
innocent of this need, dream of loss.

g r a c e

They do not always sit with an easy grace,
the aging: in afternoon light, even in October,
cracks invade her clear skin,

showing in relief, and he knows dismay,
seeing her, his own once simple face
crowding itself, as when a life within

doors runs out of thought. Yet, sober
as this renders him, he will not turn away
from her to seek some easier play:

there is no win or lose, no hunt, no race,
no battle. His eyes would disrobe her,
for she is to him more than she has been,

and he would know all, even here,
as passers pass, not seeing what his eyes see;
but he will wait on her clear sign

that this is welcome, even from his gaze,
for she has known most men hold themselves dear;
known too long their avarice that she

should shape to their dreams, their ways,
their endless drawing round her of sharp lines,
their wrapping an arm carelessly round her days,

their failing, in this many years, to touch the key
moment of her heart, that movement lacking fear
when she might freely give, without design.

Placing her hand in his, she shifts and sighs;

a not unhappy sound, considering the hour
and how late, as well, this man has come to her:

five decades they have lived apart,
as though all meaning had to be deferred;
as though autumn alone might show love's power;

as though some god, having hated happy hearts,
had suddenly relented, offering them this prize.

c a r e f u l l y

As the rains return again, she notes, almost
in passing, how her strait love remains;
how darkness, wind, and sorry days of

work and worry cannot shake it. We are not
built to last; we know that. Some speak of life
as it were stark tragedy alone, a

trudging from diaper to death bed, doomed
because end it must. Others try, by seeking
comedic relief, to put such gloom aside,

assuming that to live brightly today will,
somehow, pay for the pain of barely living
later, when last years have but begun.

Her truth: somewhere between. She would,
if the gods permitted, lose herself in your eyes
every day of forever, but knowing this

will end, and relatively soon, makes her not
over-sad, nor will she lie to you now
with thoughtless laughter; rather it makes her

carefully love you, deeply as she does here,
breathing your name in, breathing it out, like prayer.

cityscape with pink rose

I stop at the flower lady's cart
to see if she has roses. There are a few,
with straggling leaves. The blooms

are decent still, especially those in pink.
She interrupts her desultory lunch,
brushing crumbs from her sleeve, to slip

a long-stemmed pink from among the buds,
carries it to her work table, and deftly wraps
the stalk in a yellow paper, tying it,

gentle-fingered, with a thin red ribbon.
I watch her eyes as I buy; they are like
those in the face I love, but the spirit is closed:

she has dwelt upon disappointments.
As I turn away, I see in my mind's
eye, myself turning back to buy for her

one of her own roses. Ha! no doubt she must
throw away many; of all things, wouldn't
she be sick, by now, of flowers?

Trading, as she does, in these signs
of the happiness to others, what would be
happiness for her, here, today? I catch

her tracking me warily; now, as if to say:
is there some problem with the rose? No.
Or, rather, yes. Or no. I stand, unworded

by the mystery of unsharable joy.

"t h e r e w a s a w o r d

for that -- I am forgettin' it;
forgettin' things I thought I'd never not know --
As I once understood th' way a shackle will turn

to follow th' wire rope reaching back to th' pulley,
or which way th' water will run when it falls
from th' crook of an east-leaning alder in th' rain,

or run from an alder's elbow that leans west,
when th' storm comes in, always from southwest.
Oh, th' word! A short one, I should be able to just

say it! Clevis! Yes, we called a shackle a Clevis,
I don't know why. So, John, he picked up th' Clevis
and hung it on th' drawbar of the Cat, slipped

th' loop onto it, and reached to set th' pin;
but Alley, he thought he'd heard John say "Ready,"
an' put her into gear. So. That wire rope

sang just like a bowstring, an' th' Clevis
rotated right around th' slot in th' drawbar
an' went through John like he was made of suet.

He stood there for a moment -- like me now --
trying to remember. Fixin' in his mind
what it had been like, bein' alive."

l e t h e

When her back began alarmingly
to creak, and all the earth receded far
below, she made herself a bench, a slat

of fir between two other slats of fir.
Her knees derided her presumption, so
she tacked a bit of carpet on, to ease

the landings when she launched them out and down,
hoping, as she did so, nothing was
missing: not the ho-mi, nor the seeds

or seedlings in their flat, or soil she'd stolen
from the neighbor's molehills, baked and sifted,
nor the hose-end with its chilly hand

of brass. Any unpresent thing could send her
wandering from barn to potting shed
to kitchen counter, swearing at herself,

ending in her having yet another
cup of something, using up the morning's
bag of tea -- again. Gardening

is knowing what to do, and when, they say,
leaving out that bit about old brains
forgetting what to do about forgetting.

the lesson we gave in our home school,
such as it was

You know things you do not know you know, just
as Plato told us through his mouthpiece, Socrates,
who died, remember, dribbling hemlock for telling

truths. So the risk is nothing new. Language,
before all, and so far as I know, this
is true of every language, is the same

as math. If you pick up a pebble, it
is only itself, first, and never a category
unless there is an observer; that is you.

You pick up another pebble. Once it has occurred
to you there are two things, thing one, thing
two, as Dr. Seuss told us, and they

are alike enough to have some equivalency,
you are doing arithmetic. "One" plus "one,"
and then the idea "two" is introduced,

a great event in intellectual history,
as chronicled by Auel. So we have first
addition and subtraction, then multiple sets

of pebbles -- multiplication and division,
much later, but like the other, only
a little more abstract. A crow can do

this, enough to meet its needs. You like
a pea, so you look for another pea. Soon
enough, you know to go to the garden for

more peas. And a pea pod is parenthetical.
You are entering the realm of algebra, and a crow
can do that too. So it is with language.

A crow says to other crows, "Peas!" I have
seen them do it. There is a sentence implied;
"In this place there are peas." That is an algebraic

formula. "There are" is an operator; the subject
and object are operands. We pass along to others
the peas in our minds, so when they look they find

the peas we signified. This is portable;
that is, the same operation may be
performed on any like things, and also

to call some things unlike. Thus: A
equals B. Or: A equals not B.
"This apple is ripe." "no, it is not." That

is "assertion" and "refutation." The next step
is the exciting part, and is what we go
to colleges to learn. Before there were colleges

we learned it by song and dance, and by the telling
and retelling of old stories round the tribal
fires. Ready, now? Here you go:

A equals B, B equals C, therefore
A equals C. This is assertion by inference.
And: A equals B, B equals not C,

therefore A equals not C. This is refutation
by inference. Both are arguments, and both are,
together, all a university can tell you,

or, I must sadly report, tell you to misuse.
Thus: in business school, or law school, you

may be taught to subtly substitute a pebble

for a pea as one of your operands. Example:

"This is a new car. This blonde is with
this car in this image. Buy this car, and you

will get a blonde." And now you know, if you
will extrapolate from all I have told you today,
why your generation may not survive.

season of drought

It is so dry now, my desiccated friend
spits in the bowl of his pipe before applying
flame to its bitter balm, for some kind of balance.

We tread on rustling mulch to study rustling leaves,
folded in desperate prayer, of what will surely be,
still, next year, an orchard and a kitchen garden

if -- large if -- the well does not run dry.
Everywhere flit wasps, sipping at beetles'
abdomens, having small aphids for dessert.

The birds have capped their singing, panting in
small shade. "Ninety, ninety, ninety-three and ninety,
ninety-seven today, and ninety yet

for all the week ahead, with this drying wind.
Don't you think things are getting out of hand?"
I ask him. He blows a little rueful smoke

but makes no answer. I anyway know from long
acquaintance his position: "there is a law,
and you and I and all these aching things

can never break it." It's that second law
of course, the one that is the silence heard
after all laughter, after songs and tears.

Soon the moon will rise, grand but red,
dressed in soot from a dozen cackling fires.

h u m m i n g b i r d

When Polyhymnia sends refracted light
shimmering toward parched and shriveled roots,
seeking some semblance of promise kept alive
between her hands, her well, her seeds and soil,

A bit of fluff, a female Anna's, comes
to perch nearby, cocking its tiny head
and waiting. Waiting for the hose to steady
its cold blast toward some fainting eggplant

or tomatillo, ready for a burst of aimed
delight, catching one rainbowed drop of water
short, then flitting to the fence again,
shivering. To the Muse of hymns and farmers it's

a game, to the throbbing ball of feathers more.
Its heart will stop without the gift of rain.

p o l y h y m n i a

walks between the beds
critical of eye, noting the way the leaves
of corn have curled upon themselves,

rattling in hardly any breeze at all.
They'd like to make believe it's Autumn now,
would they? Playing at getting past the part

where seed heads form, waving their silky hair,
and then depart, leaving the leaves bereft

of any purpose but to leave this world --
except, of course, they don't: that is the gift
of mulch. She brings the hose and couples to

its end a yellow whirligig, made to sing
the holy song of water to the leaves.
Today, green fullness. Tomorrow, living grain.

retreated to this cabin

built so long time
done, so many childhood tears expended
on my shoulder, bruised fingers, knees whacked,

sorrows, yours and mine. I have improved these walls,
found old carpeting, tacked up that between
studs for winter, covered all with rough-sawn

one-by, loving other folk's blown fences
as I do. The desk was my mother's. These
books belong to that other person's life

that held this body five decades and more,
but I like them still. Spenser, Sidney, Plath,
Carruth, Millay, Thoreau of course, and Abbey.

Eclectic. There is no water in our creek,
it being very late in June now, and
there's heat enough for any of our Augusts.

Sweat spills from my nose, threatening to kill
Mr. Gates' supposed invention. Have I
turned off the water hoses? Paid enough

bills? I will sit and sit right here, sneaking
a look beyond the windowsill to see
the growth rate of an all-encompassing Him-

alaya runner. It wants to eat the cabin,
all eight by ten length and width of it.
When there's one more wall, that way,

or window, cinderblock steps or door for
it to steal, I'll strike. *Too much life*
is what we mean when we say "weed."

mantel graced with oil lamps and seemly books:
here she dresses. Outside, darkness, low

clouds, and the rattling of busy downspouts.
She shrugs. Through kitchen to the cold mudroom,
listening to the change in foot-fall of her heels,

from wood to tile, to concrete, she moves on,
pace quickening. No entropy now stops her.
Gathering her bent umbrella and stained coat,

she opens a door. *She walks out to the world.*